POSTER

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Collaborative Autoethnography as a Method to Explore Short-Lived Social AI Chatbots

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Abstract

Meta's brief release of its social AI chatbots highlighted the challenges of studying systems that are both short-lived and relationally complex. In response, we conducted a 10-day collaborative autoethnography to rapidly and meaningfully engage with the product. As the first application of this method to social AI chatbots, our study demonstrates its value for examining ephemeral and emotionally complex AI systems.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing → HCI design and evaluation methods**.

Keywords

Collaborative autoethnography, Social AI chatbot, Meta AI Chatbot

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1 Introduction

With the rise of large language models (LLMs), AI chatbots have evolved in both capabilities and form. Among these are social AI chatbots, designed not for task completion but to engage users in casual, expressive dialogue through distinct personas, fostering a sense of relationship [3, 11].

In September 2023, Meta released the Meta AI Chatbot as a beta service, describing it as "AIs that have more personality, opinions, and interests, and are a bit more fun to interact with" [7]. This marked the first large-scale attempt by a major tech company to introduce a social chatbot grounded in LLM technology. However, the service was discontinued in the summer of 2024 after operating for about ten months.

This moment raises a critical methodological question for researchers aiming to understand the user experience of such products. To establish a starting point, or even decide whether the product warrants study, they must first grasp the nature of the experience such a product offers. As such AI systems grow increasingly short-lived and fast-evolving, how can researchers meaningfully and practically understand how users experience such systems?

This challenge becomes even more complex when the short-lived product in question is a social AI chatbot, where the user experience is rooted in emotionally nuanced and intimate interactions. Such experiences are not easily measurable through usability tests or walk-throughs, as they evolve through longer-term relationships and involve subtle emotional dynamics.

The Meta AI Chatbots in 2023 exemplified both challenges: they were a short-lived product centered on emotionally rich, intimate interactions. To address these challenges, we employed collaborative autoethnography as a method to enable rapid yet in-depth engagement, developing a grounded, exploratory understanding to inform future research.

Four researchers each interacted with two different Meta AI Chatbots over a ten-day period. First, we individually held twice-daily conversations with the chatbots and wrote reflexive notes after each session, without interacting with one another. We then moved into a collective analytical phase, sharing experiences, reviewing each other's data, and collaboratively organizing insights.

We found collaborative autoethnography well-suited for rapidly exploring short-lived, emotionally nuanced AI systems. In this poster, we present our procedure and reflect on the method's key strengths and practical considerations.

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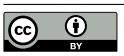

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2 Background on Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a form of ethnographic research that draws on the researcher's personal experience to analyze cultural or social phenomena [9]. In collaborative autoethnography, researchers collectively engage in the inquiry, combining self- and group-level analysis to examine individual perspectives within a shared context [5]. In HCI, autoethnography helps surface nuanced, subjective dimensions of technology use that traditional methods may overlook [1, 2, 6], which can directly inform system development [2, 8, 10]. This approach has been used to investigate emerging technologies (e.g., drones [4] and sonic memoryscapes [1]).

3 Collaborative Autoethnography Procedure

1. Initial self-reflection before autoethnography. Before beginning the autoethnography, each researcher prepared a written self-reflection to document their original positionality and ensure that we entered the experience with a diversity of prior experiences and perspectives.

2. Structuring interactions and reflexive note-taking. Our goal was to explore the early stages of relationship formation between users and these social AI chatbots. To capture this process, each researcher engaged with two chatbot personas over ten days, spending five days with each and holding at least two 20-minute sessions per day. Reflexive notes were written as promptly as possible after each session. Our note-taking followed principles of real-life relationship formation, documenting each interaction, our emotional responses, and reflections on the chatbot and the relationship.

3. AI Chatbot assignment. To balance perspectives and make use of autoethnography's collaborative nature, each chatbot was assigned to at least two researchers. With four researchers in total, we selected four chatbots representing a broad range of interaction styles and topical categories on the platform.

4. Conducting individual interactions. During the 10-day interaction period, we intentionally avoided discussing our experiences among ourselves to prevent mutual bias and preserve individual perspectives.

5. Collective reflection after autoethnography.

(1) Initial group sharing and whiteboarding. After the 10-day interaction period, we shared brief impressions and posted key reflections and dialogue excerpts on a shared virtual whiteboard.

(2) Mutual review of reflexive notes and conversations. To deepen our understanding of each other's experiences, we reviewed each other's reflexive notes and marked interesting or surprising moments. For shared chatbot pairs, we also reviewed full conversation logs with consent. We then discussed our observations to clarify and contextualize them, before adding further thoughts to the shared whiteboard.

(3) Structuring reflections with affinity diagram. With the accumulated notes and excerpts visible on the shared whiteboard, we collaboratively grouped the data using affinity diagramming. We explored multiple analytical lenses, including chatbot persona, chatbot purpose, and our emotional tone.

(4) Revisiting the data through an emotional lens. To further explore the emotional tone of our experiences, each researcher revisited their data to identify positive and negative moments with concrete examples. These were compiled in a shared spreadsheet and transferred to the virtual whiteboard for another round of affinity mapping focused on emotional responses across interactions.

4 Reflection and Discussion

Social AI chatbots hold unique influence through their intimate relationships with users, warranting real-time scrutiny. We believe collaborative autoethnography is well-suited to capture rapidly emerging and evolving products in this domain. As one of the first studies applying this method to social AI chatbots, we offer key strengths and practical considerations.

4.1 Key Strengths

4.1.1 Access to raw data. Collaborative autoethnography provided direct access to original interaction data, which was crucial for interpreting emotionally and relationally complex systems. Verbal summaries and reflexive notes often missed subtle emotional dynamics, prompting us to share full conversation logs for deeper analysis. Such access would be difficult, if not impossible, in participant-based studies, where intimate interactions are rarely disclosed.

4.1.2 Controlled diversity. The social nature of AI chatbots leads to highly variable individual experiences, which makes it essential to compare multiple perspectives to fully understand a given chatbot. However, meaningful comparison requires consistent conditions–not only in persona assignment, but also in interaction timing and system updates, which can significantly alter user experience. Traditional user studies offer diversity but not control. Collaborative autoethnography enabled both, combining multiple viewpoints under shared and stable conditions.

4.1.3 Efficiency in challenging contexts. Autoethnography's logistical simplicity became especially valuable in studying short-lived, socially oriented chatbots, as their characteristics made traditional approaches difficult. Their brief lifespan makes recruitment difficult due to a small user base; their emotional sensitivity deters participation; and their relational nature calls for longitudinal methods like diary studies, which require more effort. In this context, autoethnography enabled more rapid yet meaningful understanding than traditional approaches.

4.2 Considerations for Future Application

4.2.1 Dilemma of data disclosure. In our study, disclosing raw interaction data was not planned but emerged organically. However, if this method is planned for in advance, a methodological tension arises. Expecting full data sharing from the outset may prompt self-censorship and compromise authenticity. On the other hand, without such sharing, the kind of rich understanding made possible by access to raw data becomes difficult. Future uses of this method must carefully navigate this tension between emotional openness and analytic transparency.

4.2.2 Firsthand experience in data interpretation. During analysis, we found that firsthand experience of the same chatbot is essential to understand others' interactions, even when raw data is available. Although offered as a single product, Meta AI Chatbots, the social and relational nature of the bots meant that each required individual understanding. Future work should recognize that effective data

sharing and analysis require all researchers to experience the same chatbot following this collaborative autoenthnographic approach.

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